Spirits

A novelette by J.C.

Ash's life started relatively normal. A small 1 story house in Tennessee with his parents. Then his father divorced his mother when he was 15, and he moved to South Carolina with his mother, since they had family there and his mother didn't want to see his father anymore. Neither of his parents were much good to him, being pretty neglectful, to say the least. He managed. Today he was 16, attending his first day of junior year. Right before school, against his mother's wishes, Ash cut his own hair super short. He was happy American schools didn't have uniforms. He could wear pretty much whatever he wanted. It would be awkward being called "Ashlynn" during attendance, but he didn't care, as he didn't care much about anything. He also had a plan, to tell his friends it was just a mistake, and his name was Ash, but to make sure his mom *never* found out. That is, if he made any friends. He wasn't a very outgoing kid. When he sat down he didn't make eye contact with anyone. He sat his backpack down and looked at the whiteboard. He was handed a sheet along with everyone else in the class. He wasn't sure if he should be honest about every detail. He wasn't very sure who he was at this point in his life.

For his first period, ELA, he hadn't said a word except for "here" during attendance. He doodled on the aforementioned sheet and waited for the class to end. When they were called for their next classes, he took out his schedule from orientation and looked at what encore he was given. *Computer science?* He thought. *I didn't choose that.* He crumpled the paper and stuffed it in his pocket. He wasn't great with this kind of thing and didn't plan on going to that class. He'd never broken any rules before. Unless you count lying and low empathy, he tried to stay out of trouble, as he usually just wanted to fit in. He wasn't sure how to skip class, he just heard people stayed in the bathroom. He tried to make sure no one was looking, and when he was sure it was safe, he walked over to the bathroom. But then he suddenly got worried. He didn't care about the rules, but he did care about the repercussions. So he ran to the computer science class and made up some excuse for being late. He went to his seat and learned about computer science was. Stuff he didn't care about. A kid sitting next to him waved to him. He didn't reply. He just tried to pay enough attention so he wouldn't fall behind. Ash looked at his crumpled up schedule once again and managed to make out the name and room number. *Art? 2nd floor. Alright.* He stuffed the schedule back in his pocket. He walked to the classroom. He wasn't a huge fan of art, as he

preferred to have no rules with his art, and he knew that today they'd just be talking about the syllabus, as they do on first day days. When he walked inside he sat next to some random student from his class and zoned out.

He went through ELA the same way, and then in math he didn't do much. When he came home he walked straight to his room and listened to some music. He was doodling more on some sketchbook until he got hungry and got up to make something to eat. He looked through the freezer. Nothing good. He would have to cook…which he didn't know how to do, considering his parents never taught him. He grabbed some leftover pizza from the fridge and ate a slice. He went back to his room and did what he was doing before until he went to sleep. This was Ash's daily life other than sometimes some reckless stunts or scrolling on his phone or talking to some random classmates. When he turned 17, he thought it'd be the same as every day, but it wasn't. In those sketchbooks, he wrote about his feelings sometimes, or the lack thereof. He knew it was stupid, but it's not like he had anyone to talk to. But anyway, that day when he went to grab it, it wasn't there.

His mother must've found it. He walked down the hall to find his mother sobbing in the kitchen. "Ashlynn, how could you!?" Ash quietly took a few steps back towards his room. "Ashlynn, get your a** back in here. Explain yourself." He walked into the kitchen. She surely couldn't mean what he thought she did, right? "What, what I'd do?" He asked. She looked more angry now. "I didn't raise a daughter just so she could end up some—some confused gay! I can't believe you! They're gonna think I'm a bad mother! I'm gonna have a weird kid! You're the one who—you stepped on ants for fun! You didn't care about anyone but yourself. You didn't even consider my feelings. You're just living some lie. You know, you should just get out of my house." Ash was a little shocked, and didn't know what to do. But he was quickly reminded of the backpack, water bottles, his sketchbook, a lighter, cigarettes, and canned food that was lying around. So he grabbed a hoodie and stuffed the materials in his backpack, along with a knife in his pocket. He was done with this family, this school, this life. Not like he could stay here. So he walked out, and then was also quickly reminded that he didn't know where to go .

Today was the day everything would change forever.

He stood in an alleyway and leaned against the brick wall, pushing on a lighter, since he didn't have a flashlight, to see better. He was hoping for something good—then he looked up to see some flashing

colours. He figured he had been hallucinating, but then he was pushed farther back into a corner, and a light blinded him. He saw a woman standing in front of him…no, a girl his age, and she had wings. She had long, dark, coily hair and dark skin. She wasn't very tall but she was still taller than Ash. "Hey! Ash, is that you?" He was taken aback. "Who are you?!" He withdrew the knife out his pocket. "Woah, woah! I won't hurt you. I was just…recruiting you." He slowly put the knife back in his bag. "What, is this a cult or somethin'?" The girl shook her head. "No! You're going to help me with a quest."

"Ah, what for?" He asked. "Well, you can help me and a few other humans fight spirits. I'll-I'll pay you! I just really need your help." She answered. Money? He thought about it. "How much?"

"Uhh..I'm not sure. If we kill the spirits, though, my world will be normal again." He laughed. "Oh, you gotta be joking. Your *world?* Ya mean Earth?" She shook her head. "No! No, I'm being honest! Swear!" He looked skeptical, but then he shook her hand. "Alright, thanks for helpin' me out. I actually needed a job, I was just basically kicked outta my house." It also meant he'd be useful for something.

Her grip on his hand was firmer, and then he felt his feet swept off the ground—he was flying! He looked down, he couldn't believe his eyes. So he closed them and waited. Then there was a portal leading to the world she was talking about. He opened his eyes again. There were some more people sitting in a circle with Jess sitting in the middle. Ash took off his hoodie and set his backpack down on the orange ground. The sky was purple with stars scattered around and it was a nice temperature outside.

The other people introduced themselves. Ash hated introducing himself, but he thought of it like his coworkers instead of classmates, and that made it a little less difficult. From left to right they went, first was a tan girl with long brunette hair tied up into ponytails. "Hello, I'm Sarah. I'm 18 and I love fighting and fashion! I'm Mexican-American and I…don't really have much else to say." Next was a blonde guy with a lot of dark clothes. "Hi, I'm Finn, I'm 18 and uhh..I'll be working with you guys. I'm from Australia." Then there was the girl from earlier. "Hello! I feel my introduction will be important, so it may be a little long. I'm Jess, I'm 17, and technically an angel around here. I love art and helping people out! I will help you all through this journey, and I'll pay with whatever I got. And lastly, thank you all for agreeing to come here." Then there was a brunette woman who looked a little older than the rest of them. "Hello, I'm Star. I'm 19 and I'm from China, but I've lived in the US

for a little while now." Finally, Ash went.

"Oh…um. Hello. I'm Ash and I'm 17, I live in the US as well." Jess clapped her hands together. "Well, that's over with. Let's go get our weapons!" *Weapons?* Ash thought. *Sounds great.* They walked up a snowy hill to find a building labeled *Training Centre*. "Hello, everyone! Today we will not be training, but rather getting our weapons. I have something special for each one of you. I'm Trainer Kim." She walked over to Ash and bent down, handing him a switchblade. He smiled and stuffed it in his pocket. Then she walked to Finn and put her hand on his. "I will be giving you fire powers. Seems like it fits you." "Cool!" Finn replied. "Hey, how come he gets powers?" Ash said. "Because he just does, okay? Moving on…" She walked over to Sarah next and handed her a scythe. *Why is everyone getting cooler weapons than me!?* Ash thought. She then walked over to Star and handed her a sword. "Looks like that's everyone. See you all next week."

Ash was still taking it all in, but he was happy with the new switchblade, although he knew he had a knife in his backpack. He was messing around with it while walking back to where they were sitting. Ash went over to some grass-like area and sat down with a hoodie to sleep on. Before he slept he ate some of the canned food he packed, which only happened to be one can of cold ravioli he managed to get his hands on. He dreamt about fighting off what he imagined the spirits to be, and looking awesome while doing it. He also imagined taking revenge on the people who wronged him in his life with his new switchblade, but that was just normal in his dreams.

The next morning he woke up with the rest of the team and, of course, a spirit had appeared where they were residing. "Gosh, as soon as I wake up?" He grabbed the switchblade and tried to stab the creature, it was dark and ghost-like with red glowing eyes. It seemed injured, but wasn't dead. He pulled out the sharper knife from his backpack and stabbed it, but it still wasn't dead. "Huh?" Sarah said. "Oh, wow! There it is, a spirit!" She grabbed her scythe and sliced through it, bringing the creature to the ground. Ash smiled. "Nice job over there." Sarah smiled back. "Couldn't have done it without you, new guy."

Ash was glad he was getting along with Sarah. They both liked fighting and had artistic interests. Then Finn, Star, and Jess woke up from the commotion. "What's going on? Did you finally fight one of them spirits?" Ash nodded. "Yep! Of course we did! We did awesome, didn't we?" Sarah replied. Jess scoffed. "Oh, you get over yourselves. That's nothing. We have *much* more work to do around here." Ash laughed. "Yeah, yeah. You're an angel, it's gonna seem like nothing to

you." Star giggled a bit too. "She's right. We have lots of work to do." While walking trying to find some more things to fight, they chatted about their lives. Jess was an angel, obviously, but she also baked sometimes or painted as a side hobby. Finn was in a band, which Ash found really cool. Sarah was a cashier for now, but she was planning to become a designer. Star was in some office job which Ash didn't care about. They all mostly had jobs while Ash was still in high school, which made him feel inferior, and a little embarrassed to admit. He pushed it aside despite feeling his self image was a bit tainted now. Sure enough, they found some more spirits that day, and Finn got to show off his fire powers while Star got to show off her sword skills. Ash secretly found both of them cool but would never admit that, because he was jealous.

That evening Jess realized they hadn't eaten all day. "Oh, right! You humans need something to eat…we don't have any money to buy it currently. Can you guys eat fruit? I think we got some around here. Ooh, and some meat! Who's willing to kill an animal?" She looked around to find no one volunteering. Ash, being the sociopath he is, slowly raised his hand. "Great! We need some dinner." Sarah looked a little shocked. "Murderer!" Finn laughed. "Vegan. Enjoy having just fruit, or adapt to the climate." Sarah slapped him. "Oh, shush. I'm just joking!" Sarah replied. "Yes, stop arguing, guys. We should find something to do while they go…make dinner." Star suggested.

Meanwhile, Jess and Ash were looking for something to eat. "Okay, safe things we can eat here…there's something similar to what you call a *cow* in your world." Ash tilted his head and questioned, "Oh? Do you have your own language? I see English is the primary one around here." Jess thought for a moment. "Do I have to explain our history to you? Sit down, but we mustn't take too long, because the others are probably starving waiting for us."

Jess took a deep breath and tried to recall the important details. "Ok, so, our world is far, far out from yours, but luckily, we found the technology to contact you, the only other living planet close to us. Our population was declining due to the spirits taking over, so we needed extra help from humans. This was the first spirit takeover, before this one. When many humans came over here, some ended up staying and populating our planet. Due to the large number of English-speaking humans, over time, it became more common to speak English." Ash nodded his head. "When the humans stopped focusing on their mission, and just living here, which I don't blame them, the spirits were multiplying, and began the second spirit takeover. This time we plan to get rid of *all* of them so there can't be a third takeover." Jess

said. Ash nodded again. “Makes sense. So, do you just call the cow-like animals cows?” Jess shook her head. “No, they’re called *Kuva,* based on our original language, which is now…mostly lost, due to human colonization.”

“Ah. So, shall we kill some ‘Kuva’?” Ash asked. “Sure.” Replied Jess, a bit reluctantly. While searching in some fields nearby, they found some grazing. “You sure we should be doing this?” Jess asked. Ash shrugged and walked over. “You can find whatever part is safe to eat and cook it. I’m going to just kill it and bring it to you.” He ran over and took out his switchblade, closing his eyes while stabbing it and then handing the carcass over to Jess. “Um, here it is.” They then brought it back to the team to cook and eat.

When it was finally ready, they ate some meat and fruit together. Then Jess remembered! “Right, I have to pay you all! I apologize. I think I will give you all a paycheck by the end of the week. $30 each? I’m a little short on cash.” Ash groaned, but, money is money, so it was alright. The others seemed happy with it. Jess took another bite. “You can spend it on whatever you want around here! Or even save it for when you get back to Earth.” They nodded and continued eating.

That night was like the first. Quiet and peaceful, while still unfamiliar. They would get used to it, though. As the first week passed by, they got their paycheck and fighting spirits became the usual. Then their first real day of training would begin that morning, after they fought some more spirits. They walked into the building, and Ash was glad to get some shelter from the cold outside.

“Hello, students! We will practice fighting. Since Ash is new, I'll give him some personal training.” Ash raised his hand. “I came like a day after them, isn't this unnecessary?” Kim walked over to him. “No.” That was the end of that argument. Ash rolled his eyes. “Ugh–Ash! Do I need to tell you the rules? I'm the authority here, you must respect me!” Ash didn't understand the big deal about it.

“Okay, because *someone* here is being disrespectful, let's go over the rules. 1. Never disobey me. 2. Try your best. And 3. Make sure you respect me. Got it?” They all nodded, although a little reluctantly. Then Kim set out a training dummy and taught them all how to use their weapons. They got it pretty quickly, except Finn set it on fire and they needed a fire extinguisher. The rest was easy, just stabbing and slicing. After that, Kim left them with the dummy and took Ash down to a warehouse nearby. She tied her blue hair up and unlocked the building.

“Okay, Ash. First, let's learn stabbing!” Kim said. “I already know how to do that! Watch!” He stabbed a training dummy that was shoved among other things in the warehouse. “Alright. Then…reflexes?” As she said that, she punched Ash in the face. “What the–” Ash said. He quickly became angry and kicked between her legs. That had to show her something. “I think I already know a thing or two about fighting.” She got back up and pushed him against the wall. “Disobedient little prick…” she muttered. “All I’m trying to do is teach you!” Ash pushed her away and crossed his arms. “Yeah, right.” She leaned in closer and Ash’s stomach dropped. He kicked her again and ran up to where Jess stood, near the training building. “Can we get a new trainer? This one doesn't take me seriously.” He said, while pointing back at Kim, who was on the ground, trying to get up. Jess chuckled. “How about we go through another day of training? Then we can determine what to do.” Ash nodded, a little disappointed, and walked back inside. He heard Kim's footsteps through the snow, walking back up to the building. *Dang it.*

“Ash, I'm gonna give you one more chance next time we do training. Then I'll see if I can really train you. This is because I think you have potential if you were just more…respectful.” Ash nodded, and chuckled a bit, realizing the parallel to how he was seeing if *she* was a good trainer. “As for the rest of you, you did great. I'll see you all next week. G'bye!” Ash sighed a sigh of relief, he was glad to get outta that place. He had a bad feeling about her, but he shrugged it off. Probably wasn't important. The team chatted and then ate before going to sleep. The next morning, they would find a place to buy food, so they wouldn't spend all their time trying to find meat to kill.

Jess came back from the restaurant holding some pancakes. “I got us some real nice food today, it’s quite a bit of money, but it’s delicious! I tried some.” She sat it down and they all shared it. “Thanks, this is good.” Finn said while taking a bite. When they were finished they got up. “We’re going to move to another area today. We will only come back here for training. Everyone got that?” They nodded and started walking down a path through the snow, which Jess knew her way around.

The path led to a warmer area with less snow, so you could see the orange ground and grass scattered around. “We will start looking for spirits here, and once we are done, we will continue walking further. The next biome is much warmer, and we’ll have to do some flying to fully get across, in which we’ll take breaks in between, since I can only carry so much weight for so long.” They sat down and looked for any spirits lurking.

Finn was eating a berry from a bush nearby while Ash sat next to him, looking around. On the other side of the grass was Jess, Sarah, and Star. "'You sure that's okay to eat?" Ash said, trying to break the silence. Finn looked up. "Oh, yeah, it's what Jess has been giving us. Ash nodded and then zoned out while pulling out handfuls of grass. "Don't do that." Ash wasn't paying attention and didn't care much.

Meanwhile, Jess was searching for spirits while Sarah and Star chatted. She had some better luck with it, finding 2 within the first few minutes. Ash thought about the luck with finding and killing spirits and decided to think of it as gambling, to make it more fun, and less of a chore. He liked that sort of thing, it satisfied his constant boredom. "We should sit over there," Finn said, pointing at where Jess was standing. "I think that's where they're coming from. We should help her." Ash walked down with him to where the rest of the team was and helped kill some more spirits before they moved on to the next area.

Ash was looking behind the trees and finally found a spirit to kill on his own! He'd strayed from the team a bit, and he decided this was his moment to finally prove himself, even though no one would see him. After all that thinking, he snapped back to reality and realized the spirit had been twisting around him and suffocating him. How would he break out of this with no one nearby? He tried to reach his knife to see if that would work.

When he managed to get the knife out of his pocket, he carefully cut the spirit off of his neck without stabbing himself in the process. He stepped away from it and stabbed it a few times until it finally got on the ground. He then stomped on it a few times until it was completely unconscious. Then he stabbed it some more for good measure. He was feeling pretty proud of himself.

He was now excited to tell the team about his accomplishment. He found the team in the middle of fighting a spirit, so he waited for them to be done with that. He could join in, but he wasn't feeling like risking his life again right after just doing it. Jess was holding the spirit down while Sarah, Star, and Finn took turns slicing and burning it until it finally disappeared. "Well that was graphic." Sarah remarked. "Oh, Ash! Did you see that? I think we did pretty well!" Finn exclaimed. "Yeah, I'm glad we got that one down! But there should still be more around here." Jess said. "I'm not sure about the morality of all of this, but it's oddly fun. I like *adventure*!" Sarah said. Ash thought it was pretty cool but was getting impatient waiting for his turn to talk. "Well, don't worry about the morality of it, Sarah.

They're like an invasive species, it's like when people make those videos crushing snail eggs." Sarah nodded. "Guys, I killed a spirit all by myself after it almost killed me! You should've seen it! It was suffocating me, but I managed to cut it off and stab it until it finally died!" Ash said. He soon realized he may have been a little too enthusiastic, but he didn't care. Star smiled. "Awesome." Sarah laughed. "Well, you're eager to kill. I'm starting to think you're a *sociopath* or something." It was just a small remark, but the word stuck in Ash's head. *Sociopath.* He didn't think it was that obvious. He didn't like that fact. But there was no time for him to unpack that. He walked with the team to hunt for more spirits until they had to eat again and finally go to sleep. *Today was a good day.* He thought. He thought he should feel guilty for how good he felt after killing something, mainly also because of Sarah's remark. But he couldn't feel guilt, so he was just as glad as he could be that he'd considered a day good.

The next morning they'd gotten up and walked to a diner. When they got their food, some berries on top of something similar to a waffle, Jess had explained her plan for today. "Today we will be walking a lot. We're going to the next area. We also will not be training for a long time since going to the training area requires going all the way back." They all agreed and Ash was grateful that he didn't have to go see Kim again, whom he considered "a prick." When they got out of the diner they began their journey to the next place. It would be even warmer as they got closer to the equator. Ash took off his hoodie and stuffed it in his backpack, which still had some canned food he'd forgotten about and the switchblade Kim gave him. He liked using the bigger knife he brought with him more. Sarah was always wearing a tank top, so she didn't have to worry about how hot it got. Ash wondered how she survived in the snow. Must've been lended a jacket when he wasn't looking.

Star took off her green jacket and Jess took off her green hoodie. Ash thought, *with how many people are taking off jackets, I suppose we were just ready for the cold climate and not here.* Maybe he should've thought that you can take a jacket on and off, that's the point. Apparently a lot more spirits were here, because the team found 4 of them crowding around them when they finally arrived.

"Dang it! I was not prepared for this!" Finn said. "Let's just get this over with." Star remarked. She took out her sword and started fighting one. Then the rest of the team got out whatever weapons they had on them and did whatever they could to kill the spirits. When that was over, they decided to take a break since they had been walking and

fighting a lot, and sat near a river which had a gorgeous waterfall. They noticed another person there. Jess had recognized them. Star had too.

It was Star's partner and Jess's ex-friend, Alex. But the team didn't know them. “Alex! I haven't seen you since I joined the team.” Star said, walking up to them. “Yep. I got a knife with me if you need me to join the team.” Said Alex. “Cool.” Finn said. Sarah and Ash weren't really paying attention to them and were off doing their own thing. Jess had resented Alex, but Star liked them. Jess wished she could tell them why.

Since it was getting closer to the end of the week, Jess was wondering how she would get the paycheck for her team. She wouldn't be at work and couldn't come up with the money. She decided to break the news to them. “So guys, you have to work for free now…I can't go to work with all this and can't get money for you. So I guess you're free to go now if you want.” The team thought about it. After these past few days, money wasn't much of a concern as survival was and saving this planet. They agreed to stay since they, as Ash put it, “made it this far.” Jess also realized without a job she'd lose the money for food and they'd have to survive off Ash's canned food and eventually hunt down animals and fruit again. She also had to tell the team this, in which they groaned but accepted, as that's what they had to do. The next few days were spent traveling, eating, fighting whatever spirits they could, and then they reached the next area. Alex was showing off to the team as the new member, Star was keeping quiet unless needed, Ash was doing the same unless he got bored. Finn was fighting whatever spirits he could and Sarah would help him out. Jess would look out for spirits and look for any food they could find.

This next area was warmer than before and most of the team was doing good. Ash had to take off his hoodie, and he was a little insecure, considering they would find the scars from when he got bored with a knife and his probably deteriorating health from slight malnutrition and smoking. Jess had noticed and pulled him aside. “Hi Ash, while the team is doing as usual, I wanted to ask if you’re okay?” Ash was taken aback, no one ever asked him anything like that. “I mean, I’m fine, I’m alive, so that’s alright.” Jess shook her head. “No, are you like, *good?*” Ash thought for a moment. “Yeah, I know, I wasn’t the best option for fighting. I’m not great at running since smoking.” Jess grabbed his arms harder. “It’s fine, really. I wasn’t talking about that. I mean, kind of, but you’re good at actual combat so it’s fine, I was talking about the scars.” He was hoping she wouldn’t bring that up. “Eh, I had some mental issues a few years back, got

bored with a knife, or angry, you know. It's fine now. Now let's never bring this up again, okay?" His tone progressively got more aggressive, so Jess nodded and walked back to the team.

"Hi guys! We just killed one, we could've used your help." Sarah remarked. "See? That was unnecessary." Ash replied. Jess looked down. "I'm sorry. I promise we will help on the next one! Right, Ash?" He nodded, he hated the way she said it, but he did like feeling useful. Alex was spinning around her knife and Star pointed over to some fruit nearby. They grabbed some and Jess looked to make sure it was safe. She confirmed it was good and they had that as their lunch.

The next day they got up and searched for any civilians or shops around the area. Seems they were unlucky. They found a forest and searched for spirits there instead. They found some and killed them. They couldn't find many after the first few so it was a pretty uneventful day. But it was not an uneventful night…

That night was pretty quiet, but Alex and Star had stayed up extra late with the others asleep. Alex had brought some bottles with them, as they were an addict, and Star had noticed this. Star immediately got angry. She told her to at least *try* to quit. Alex didn't care. They "felt fine." Alex popped a pill in her mouth because that day wasn't very good for her, thinking Star was asleep. She looked up and Star was standing above her. "What did I tell you about this!? You-you don't care about us!" Star was usually pretty quiet. She was surprised at how she was yelling right now, but she was in a rage and didn't care.

Alex told her to screw off because it wasn't her issue. Star broke into tears. "I can't believe I did all that. I probably woke someone up. It's your fault." Alex shook her head. In their mind it wasn't that big of a deal. She walked off farther into the forest and did whatever she wanted there until she decided to go to sleep.

The next morning Jess told them this area was pretty empty and they should move. The team had agreed. They were walking all day. Finn was happy that the mission was going well, but had an underlying feeling of boredom. Sarah felt the same way, slightly missing home. Star was feeling vaguely good but tired. Jess was also tired but happy about the mission going well, similarly to Finn. Alex wasn't thinking much of anything, just reluctantly going with them. Ash was thinking a whole lot lately.

He was sure he didn't care much for anyone. But he was thinking about Jess actually *caring* about him the other day. Maybe she was

just required to because she was his teammate. He shook it off as temporary and stupid, and tried to get these thoughts out of his head quickly. He kept walking and tried to pretend he never thought of it at all. The next area was dusty, red, and foggy. Jess said this place was more dangerous, but many spirits would hang out here, because not many humans were around, and they could more easily survive and multiply. They all split up and looked around trying to kill whatever they saw move. That day was a good day for their mission. Little did they know, they were actually very close to the leader of the spirits, which if they knew, they would think they were absolutely dead if they didn't act smart and quick.

After they had killed some spirits, they went to a nearby lake to wash up and drink some water. The water flowed slowly and looked nice contrasted against the reddish, foggy sky. Jess, as an angel, could filter the water, so they were able to safely drink it. They sat down and chatted. "How is everyone doing?" Jess asked, while using her powers to filter the water. "Good." Star answered. Everyone else nodded, since you're expected to say good when people ask that sort of thing. "Well, I think this may be our last area," Finn looked up. "Really?" He asked. Jess nodded. "Yes, we went to the main areas where the spirits reside. Of course, we may need to look over everything, but I heard there may be another way to get rid of them forever." That was certainly intriguing. Alex put some water in a cup and took a sip. "What d'ya mean?" Jess clapped her hands together excitedly. "This will be much quicker as well!" "Go on." Star said. "I heard there is a leader of the spirits from…what was her name? Trainer Kim." Ash rolled his eyes. "Please, just hear me out on this one. If we kill the leader of the spirits, I think it kills all of them! So we can be free of them." Sarah raised her hand. "What's so wrong with the spirits, anyway?"

Jess sighed and chuckled. "Have you really not paid attention? Did you kill without even thinking of that?" Sarah questioned her morality for a few seconds before Jess interrupted, "Don't worry! The reason we kill them is, again, they are like an invasive species, but also because they kill our people." Sarah nodded. "Oh. Okay." Finn grabbed a cub of water and chugged some before they decided to stand up and walk. With the impending arrival of their final fight, they thought about the implications, and started to worry. They slept on a patch of grass, some sleeping on the hoodies they weren't wearing.

That night Finn was a little restless, and Ash was also awake because he didn't feel like sleeping. Finn looked over at Ash's bag, then up at

the sky, and sighed. “Hey, what’re you doing up now?” Finn whispered to him. “Don’t wanna sleep. You?” Ash said. “Can’t. Y’got anything to help?” Ash thought for a moment. In these times, he would draw or hurt himself or smoke a cigarette. He slid him a ripped page from his sketchbook, a lighter, and a cigarette. Finn wasn’t big on drawing so he took the cigarette. “Thanks, I guess.” Finn remarked. “No problem.” Ash replied, not very genuinely, noticing sarcasm in Finn’s tone. He lit it up and inhaled, and laid down. Just what he needed, a hit of nicotine and dopamine for his worries. Eventually he went to sleep, as the tiredness caught up to him.

The next morning they woke up, rather groggily for Ash and Finn due to the lack of sleep. But they had to get up, bigger days were coming. Jess said they were going to search for something to eat and then practice using their weapons on spirits. Sarah and Star looked for any vegetation with edible food, which they would bring to Jess. Ash and Alex looked for stores. Jess and Finn looked for any meat. “What kind of meat do you find here anyway?” Finn asked Jess, who he was walking beside through the seemingly barren flat plateaus. Jess groaned. “I already had this conversation with Ash! Just follow me.” Finn continued walking beside her while they looked around. They had found some animals there and Jess would use her powers to kill them and Finn would cook them with his fire powers. It wasn’t much, but after they got some, they sat down and waited for the rest of the team. Sarah and Star had found some bushes. “Do you think there’s any fruit around here?” Sarah asked. Star looked up and replied, “I doubt it with this biome. We should go find some of our team members and tell them we can’t find anything.” Sarah shook her head. “Let’s not give up now. Search through the bushes.” There was no fruit there, so they ended up going with Star’s plan.

Because of the hotter and harsher weather conditions, not many people lived in this area. Ash and Alex would be unlikely to find stores for food. But they couldn’t starve, so they had to search. “This is so stupid! If we stay here, we’re going to starve to death. It’s barren.” Alex remarked. Ash rolled his eyes. He wanted to tell her to shut up, but he decided not to cause any trouble, so he didn’t say anything. Luckily, in the distance, they could find a dirt road leading somewhere.

“Finally! A road.” Ash said. They began walking towards it. With all this walking and his bad lungs, Ash was wishing he had a vehicle. Fortunately, there was a small village that had a few shops in the middle of the road. They walked over to one that was selling vegetables. “Hello. What currency do you use here?” Alex asked the

man at the shop. “Well, we use *munten*, what else would we use?” “Munten means coin in their original language,” Alex whispered to Alex. With another currency, how would they ever get paid appropriately or convert currency from another world when they got back to earth? Ash thought. This whole thing was a scam! While he was thinking all of that, Alex had to step in front of him. “I apologize for him over there, he’s an Earth visitor. I think I have some munten for you, sir. How much is an assortment of *verd*?” Verd being vegetable.

“Just 5 munten, ma’am.” She got some of her pocket change and slid it over to him. Then they grabbed some vegetables and put them in a paper bag. “Thank you.” Alex said before they left. “Ugh, so rude!” Alex commented. “Whatever do you mean?” Ash replied, slightly sarcastically. “You weren’t replying to the cashier! Do I have to do everything around here?” She scoffed. Ash shook his head and chuckled a bit. They went off to find the rest of the team. Eventually they all met again, and shared what they found. “We found a village and got some vegetables.” Ash said, setting down the thin brown bag of veggies. Sarah and Star explained there was little to no vegetation here, and the vegetables Alex and Ash found must have been imported to the village to distribute. “We got some meat, but it’s limited for now.” Finn said, showing them the meat they found and cooked. Suddenly, from behind Alex, a spirit appeared. Star noticed and ran straight over with her sword, repeatedly slicing and stabbing the spirit until it left Alex alone. Even with their issues now, Star didn’t want Alex to die. “Well, that was an eventful morning.” Finn said. They searched for some spirits to practice their weapons on for a few hours. They would spend the rest of the day walking towards a mysterious building they presumed to be the spirit leader’s home, if he was even real. At this point there was no need to be nervous, it was inevitable. That was Ash’s mindset to distract himself from the apparent impending fight and possible death. They estimated they would go inside the next day, since they got closer.

They woke up determined to kill. To bring peace to this world they barely even knew about before a few weeks ago. It all went by pretty quickly, but here they were, and there was no turning back. Their shortcut to peace came through violence. They looked at the building. The dust was pulled around the building in the wind. It was tall and black, and when they opened the door, the floor was metal. They could hear every footstep, just as every heartbeat. And surely enough, they looked up to find someone. A creature. Similarly to Alex, he had horns, but the rest of him looked like a void. Glaring. “Someone finally found out about me? Who told you?” He asked. As the leader

of the group, Jess stepped up, trembling. “You can’t do this anymore! Find your own planet!” He chuckled. “These spirits have nowhere else to live. Do you find this mindless killing justified?”

Jess thought for a moment. “He’s trying to get inside your head!” Ash yelled behind her. She looked at him and nodded, then looked back up. “Your spirits mindlessly kill *us!* They are invasive!” He nodded. “Yes…but it’s still life, you bastards. If you really want this to end, come fight me.” They looked at each other in reluctant agreement. The metal clanged as they stepped forward. The spirit leader pulled his hand forward and summoned a beam of fire, and almost as it hit Finn, he reflected it with his own fire. “Hm…that won’t work…” he muttered. He summoned some chains instead to pull them down. Jess used her powers to break them. “You all really want to come across as my equal. Well you’re not-“ “Skip the corny dialogue!” Alex interrupted. He summoned a sword and stabbed her. Star was shocked. She walked over to her. “Wha—Jess, can’t you revive her or something!?” Jess shook her head. “I’m afraid not.” Star wiped her tears and quickly got up, still clearly distraught, but determined to win. There was no time for grief. She walked up to him with her sword and they clashed their swords together. If she stopped concentrating for even a second, she would certainly die. She ended up pushing her sword to the right of his, knocking it out of his hands. She sliced off his hand. She ran back behind Finn and let him use some fire to hold him off while the others prepared for their attacks. With the spirit leader wounded, they would be able to easily injure him until finally killing him. Jess used her powers to help Finn. While they held him off, Sarah and Ash ran and sliced him as he groaned in agony. Ash took out all his anger on him. He stabbed his chest while Sarah cut off his other arm with her scythe, and he fell down. Finn and Jess stopped their powers for a bit to recharge them. He finally regained his composure and pushed them all away, hitting them with the chains again. They ended up with scratches, but were ultimately still alive. Someone would have to stop him again before he could stab them again, so Finn went and fired his powers at his eye. Without his hands or wounded eye, he was now losing blood and couldn’t see them as well. He used part of what was left of his powers to push the others out of the building. “Finn. I’ve been watching you.”

“What do you want from me?” Finn exclaimed. “I’ve seen you in this place! Your hesitation, how easily you can be persuaded, you hide your less fortunate feelings…I want you to fight me, since you’re basically carrying your team, anyway.” He nodded. He had no other choice. It was do or die. So he chose to do.

The more time passed, the weaker he got, so Finn just had to focus at just the right times to fire and dodge. When he fired some more chains at him, Finn ran to the other side and fired at him. It went on until both were left injured. Finn fired at his other eye and called for his teammates to come in.

They all used what they had to finish him off, until finally… He had died.

“It was really that simple all this time?” Ash commented. “Oh, shut up! Alex died! Do you not care?!” Ash didn’t, but he didn’t say anything. Jess put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay. What matters is that the rest of us came out okay and our world is rid of the curse of spirits.” Star tried to smile, but couldn’t. Alex didn’t even have a chance to redeem herself now. But she was kind of glad. Alex was bringing her down in some ways. Was it bad to hate someone over their addiction?

Some centimeters away stood Finn and Sarah celebrating. Sarah cheered, Finn wiping his tears. “I can’t believe it! We made it!” They hugged and then went to the rest of the team. Jess sighed. “I guess now this means you get to go home. I’m sorry I didn’t pay you all. Goodbye.” She opened up 4 portals. One near Ash’s house, one in Star’s home, one in Sarah’s home, and one in Finn’s. After saying his farewells, Finn walked in without a second thought. Star started walking to her home, before Sarah grabbed her arm. “Wait.” Star looked back. “What is it?” Sarah looked around, trying to find the words. “I have a confession to make.” Star nodded. Jess closed up the portal since it took up a lot of her energy, and she wasn’t going to sit around forever. “I thought you were really cool ever since I saw you and I guess I…wanted to spend more time with you.” Star’s face began to flush. “What…me? You know my girlfriend just died in front of me?” Sarah shook her head! “No, no. Not like that. I meant-I meant I want us to be friends on Earth together! What area did you live in?”

Star thought. “California. Why?” Sarah’s face lit up. “I lived in California too! We can still meet up! Wait, I’ll just give you my number! Ash, did you bring a pencil with your sketchbook?” Ash looked through his backpack and handed her a piece of paper and pencil. She wrote her phone number on it and gave it to Star. Jess opened the portals back up. “Thank you. See you on the other side!” Star said, before she waved and walked into the portal. Sarah followed after her. “Why aren’t you going, Ash?” Jess asked Ash. “I was homeless, remember?!” Jess thought for a moment. “I can help you out. I mean, we survived without a home on this planet, we can do it

together on Earth too." Ash smiled. They walked into the portal. It was daytime back home. Now they just had to navigate whatever came their way.